



Addressing bullying in our schools

Introduction

I read recently that bullying has become “big business.” You can buy books on the subject, you can purchase courses, workbooks, and programs, or you can hire consultants. You can even pay a speaker to come to your school, hype up a gym-full of kids on how they’re going to be nice to everybody from now on, get them to recite an anti-bullying pledge, and have them all sign their names on a huge banner that proclaims your school to be “zero-tolerance.”

Despite how “gimmicky” (and expensive) some of these strategies are, there is no denying that bullying is a hot topic among educators and parents. As well it should be. Bullying crosses every age, gender, and school in our country, showing up every day in our Reformed schools as well. How do we as a Reformed community address this issue?

What the research says

Bullying is a deliberate, hostile, and repeated behaviour which is intended to harm others. It can occur directly (face-to-face) or indirectly (behind someone’s back). Bullying can be physical. It can also be verbal: name calling, silent treatment, arguing into submission, gossip/false rumours, staring, giggling, laughing at the victim, and mocking. Bullying can be psychological, with the goal of socially isolating the victim. Social isolation can be achieved through a wide variety of techniques: gossip, refusing to socialize with the victim, bullying others who socialize with the victim, and criticizing socially significant items (e.g. clothing).

While bullying takes place in a variety of contexts, the majority of bullying occurs in school and other similar situations that involve a large child to adult ratio. And within the school context, the incidence of bullying increases as adult supervision decreases. Recess, hallways, bathrooms, physical education classes, group work, bus rides, and after-school activities are among the most common bullying contexts. While seventy-one percent of teachers believe that they almost always intervene, only twenty-five percent of students agree. The fact is, adults don’t realize how often they miss bullying episodes. Research shows that teachers intervene in fourteen percent of classroom episodes and only four percent of playground episodes. Such a low intervention rate is attributed to the fact that the majority of bullying is verbal, brief, and occurs specifically when monitoring is low. While adults are often unaware of bullying, eighty-five percent of bullying episodes occur while peers (bystanders) are present.

Victims of bullying often keep the problem a secret. They feel ashamed, worry about retaliation, and do not believe that adults will be able to help. Children who are bullied report feelings of sadness and anxiety. They lose interest in other activities and school performance decreases; their focus has shifted from recreation and education to surviving the bullying. Victims may withdraw socially or become aggressive. Children who are being bullied may refuse to go to school or feign illness to avoid school.

Experts in the field of bullying research are also clear on the reason they believe bullying occurs. It is not about a child manifesting personal feelings of anger. It is not about children attempting to solve conflicts. Barbara Coloroso (author of *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*) writes,

It’s about contempt – a powerful feeling of dislike toward someone considered to be worthless, inferior, or undeserving of respect ... they rationalize that their supposed superiority entitles them to hurt someone they hold in contempt, when in reality it is an excuse to put someone down so they can feel “up.”

Secular research continually emphasizes that bullies are not born bullies; rather, their behaviour is learned and can be changed.

Interpreting the facts as a Reformed community

Bullying is a complex issue. There are many people involved (the victim, the bully, bystanders, parents, teachers, school administrators, and school board). Each of them will have a different view of the situation, coloured by personal experience, their role in the situation, and their beliefs about bullying.

Not every adult will see all the behaviours listed above as bullying. Others believe that some or even all forms of bullying are a normal stage of life – “kids will be kids.” They argue that it builds character, that children need to learn to resolve their own conflicts, that bullying causes no lasting harm, that victims somehow deserve it, and so on it goes.

Adults who share any of these beliefs need to rethink their position. The fact that bullying increases as supervision decreases clearly shows that children instinctively know bullying is wrong. It must be agreed that any bullying behaviour from physical aggression (tripping, pushing, hitting) to verbal taunting (gossip, mocking) to psychological bullying (social isolation) is hurtful and unacceptable. The Lord commands us to treat every person with love; behaviour that is harmful specifically goes against what God requires of his people. Bullying is about contempt – a feeling of dislike and superiority. Such hatred is sin. Treating someone as inferior is sin. When our covenant children commit the sin of contempt and hatred, we are required to respond with discipline.

The old adage “kids will be kids” is meant to imply that their behaviour is no big deal because they’ll grow out of it – somehow, magically, our little bullies will grow up into good, decent adults. Well, kids *will* be kids; we believe that every child is conceived and born in sin. The Lord tells us that *“folly is bound up in the heart of a child”* (Proverbs 22:15). If we believe our children are conceived and born in sin, it will not surprise us that our children bully.

The effects of bullying include sadness, anxiety, withdrawal or aggression, and decreased academic performance. In addition, I wonder about spiritual effects. If a Reformed child is bullied by his fellow church members, would he want to remain a member of the church? How will a bullied child be able to worship or attend Bible study with those same people as an adult?

Secular research suggests that bullying is a learned behaviour. It is not a surprising conclusion, considering our world sees children as innocent and people as basically good. And so they look to external factors, such as television and video games, family stress, inconsistent discipline, and aggressive peers (to name a few). And if good, innocent children learn to bully, experts say, then they can be taught the skills that will eradicate bullying and learn kindness and empathy in its place.

We can certainly teach kindness and empathy to our covenant children; in fact, it is our responsibility to do so. However, knowing that children are conceived and born in sin will change the way we discipline and alter the way we design our schools’ bullying policies. It also means that we know bullying will remain an issue in our schools despite the implementation of good policies.

A Reformed policy

A myriad of anti-bullying programs are available to schools. There is a “no-blame method,” where teachers meet with bullies and bystanders to find a solution. No blame is assigned, under the assumption that bullies will not feel threatened and will join in becoming part of the solution. This method is obviously based on the theory of inherent goodness. Other methods encourage counselling between bully and victim, or “circle-time,” where a class discusses bullying incidents together. However, victims feel humiliated and distressed when required to discuss the incidents in front of their peers. It also gives bullies more ammunition once away from adult supervision. There are “telling schools,” where children are taught from kindergarten on that any incident of bullying is unacceptable and must be reported. This seems to have good results; peers witness bullying that

adults may miss but the responsibility for dealing with the situation is immediately passed to a teacher rather than asking children to solve the problem.

While some programs may work better than others, I believe the key to dealing properly with the issue of bullying in our Reformed schools is to develop (and consistently implement!) good policies and procedures. I have stated that bullying is a complex issue; as such, action must be taken on many levels. Our focus must extend past the bully and victim to peers, teachers, parents, principal, school board, and school society. An anti-bullying policy should include several things:

- ***A commitment to address bullying***

Our schools must be committed to addressing this issue as an extension of being committed to fostering a Christian atmosphere in all aspects of school life.

- ***A definition of bullying***

As stated earlier, people may fail to recognize the wide variety of techniques used by bullies. If bullying is unacceptable, all students, teachers, and parents must recognize what bullying is.

- ***A process to respond to bullying***

We need to choose consistent, formative consequences and decide on the roles and responsibilities of teachers, parents, and school administrators (immediate response, communication between home and school, follow-up, etc.).

The process of responding to bullying in our Reformed schools needs to be scriptural in character. Our policies must contain more than a list of consequences. The process needs to involve repentance and restitution on the part of the bully. It also needs to involve follow-up by staff and parents, understanding that sinful behaviour is not resolved quickly; rather, discipline takes time and diligent effort.

- ***A process to prevent bullying***

Strategies must be identified to develop awareness, communicate expectations to students (bullies, victims, and bystanders), and increase adult supervision. Developing awareness of bullying is not just important for students and teachers. Here parents and the larger church community can play a vital role. Parents need to ask questions, start discussions with their children, and be prepared to provide guidance. Your child may be bullying, your child may be bullied, or your child may watch others being bullied every day, not knowing what to do. At home visits, elders could ask kids if the children in their class are treated with kindness.

Schools that do not yet have an anti-bullying policy should begin to develop one. Clarifying the strategies for prevention of and response to bullying will increase awareness and provide guidance to the entire school community. The committee that develops the policy should include the school principal, parents, and teachers. Once implemented, such a policy should also be assessed and revised regularly.

A few tips

Much more could be said about the strategies for dealing with bullying. Here I must be brief, so I will mention just two points.

First, we need to understand the dynamic of power that characterizes bullying. Because it is based on the imbalance of power between bully and victim, adults need to be sensitive in the way we deal with bullying episodes. Don't gather bullies *together* to discuss the issue with an adult or, worse yet, with the victim. Adult(s) should speak to one child at a time, hearing the victim first. Placing a group of bullies together gives them a sense of unity and makes your job in touching their conscience and encouraging repentance much harder. Putting the bully and victim together in effort to find out what happened gives the bully a chance to see his/her victim's hurt and anxiety, increasing the imbalance of power. Only once a bully feels sorrow and empathy is it time to get the students together – for apology and restitution.

Second, bullies often use the victim's traits to rationalize that the victim deserved the bullying. I have heard many adults say, "No, bullying isn't ok, but..." I'd like to ask a question: but *what*? She acts differently than other kids? He isn't always clean? They wear funny clothes? He does well in school and brags about it? She looks at you funny? Fill in the blank. What makes it ok to treat someone with contempt, as though you are better than them? If you talk this rationalization through, I know you can come to only one conclusion: we are all God's covenant children. Sinful, deserving of nothing, and yet redeemed by Him.

Conclusion

As parents there are many things my husband and I pray for our children. One of them is that they love the Lord. Another is that they are safe. We want to teach them obedience and respect and kindness. Our goal is to raise them to be adults who love and serve God and their neighbour. As members of the church, we all hope for these things for each covenant child.

As it is our responsibility to teach our children about Christ's selfless work of redemption and love, so must we instruct, guide, and correct the sin of bullying. Paul writes in Romans 15:5-7,

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.

L Veenendaal

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